

# SOME REFLECTIONS ON EUGENICS AND RELIGION.\*

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Eugenics is the science of human betterment. Its object is to discover how we may breed better human beings. The eugenicist seeks to improve human racial stocks in the belief that he can thereby quicken the process of civilisation. He fixes attention primarily on the individual and not on his surroundings. He is concerned with nature rather than nurture, with the innate qualities which the individual inherits rather than with the environment in which those qualities have an opportunity of growth and expression. Eugenics and Sociology are thus complementary to one another. The extravagant eugenicist says that the swine makes the sty. The extravagant sociologist says that the sty makes the swine. Neither statement expresses the full truth and even expert biologists differ widely as to the extent to which the balance of truth inclines one way or the other.

It cannot be disputed that the innate good qualities which a man inherits fail to develop in bad surroundings. Ignorance, dirt, vicious example and abject poverty degrade personality. They prevent the growth of that which is best in a child and stimulate its baser instincts. So strong in the life of a child are the influences of what the psychologists call *association* and *suggestion* that many think that environment is of more importance than heredity. It must be admitted that our knowledge as to what constitutes 'heredity' lacks precision. We are ignorant as to how far a child receives from its parents at conception a set of physical and psychical fundamentals which no environment will change. But statistical enquiries in general confirm the common saying that 'like begets like.' We have, moreover, to remember that civilisation is a racial product. The forces of association and suggestion which act on any individual within it, no less than most of his physical surroundings, are the creation of the race. If the racial stock be good such forces and physical conditions will gradually become more beneficial. If the stock be poor, both its physical environment and mental atmosphere will gradually degenerate. The ultimate creative power of a civilisation resides in the innate racial qualities of the people which make it, whatever be the process by which those qualities were initially produced.

No nation is homogeneous. Probably all races result from a blend of peoples of different types. A so-called pure race is one which has lived so long free from alien intrusion that a uniform type has been gradually evolved. In such a race the fundamentals due to heredity have been thoroughly mixed. Among its members there is therefore a

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naturally strong social cohesion. Individuals think, feel, and act in much the same way. In particular there will be uniformity of religious outlook. For a pure race what Disraeli called 'the religion of all sensible men' is a definite entity.

When a nation is mixed and, in particular, when one race imposes itself upon another there can be no such unity. At first the apparent civilisation will be that of the dominant race. Culture will be created by the ruling aristocracy: and the populace will accept organisation by which it benefits, though this be based on principles and ideas with which it has little sympathy or understanding. This situation probably existed when Greek civilisation reached its zenith. Ultimately the ruling stocks died out, dissipated by war or luxury. Such of their descendants as survived were the offspring of mixed marriages, racially impure. Now when two races are thus mixed the individual seems to lack stability of organisation. The characteristics derived from his parents are associated rather than blended. Probably it is only after a fairly large number of generations that a new type of harmony is created. In the early generations the physical characters of one or other of the parental types may be dominant: but the recessive strain cannot be ignored; and I believe that in the fundamentals of the mind there is disharmony. The distrust of half-castes is not the outcome of mere prejudice. They are often unstable in character. In popular phrase 'you never know what they will do next.' It is impossible to foretell which side of their mental inheritance will be uppermost on any particular occasion.

After a sufficient number of generations a mixed race evolves a unity, a unity in diversity, of its own. Which of the two strands which go to make it is dominant? The answer seems to be that which is indigeneous to the soil. Black and white in England mate and white survives. Black and white in Jamaica mate and black survives. There seems little doubt that in ancient Greece the original population gradually asserted itself. Most certainly the great intellectual achievements of the Golden Age were gradually ignored; they were submerged by primitive folk-beliefs thrust up from the populace. Moreover where the physical characters of one of two mixed races prove the stronger, the mental qualities of that race are usually dominant; and vice versa. The half-caste in Jamaica not only becomes darker in successive generations but he also becomes more negroid in his habit of mind. Language, as we know, is no criterion of racial origin. But ideas and especially religious ideas are a very good criterion as to which strain in a mixed race has proved the stronger. The religious practices and beliefs of the black Republic of Hayti are not, according to good observers, vastly different from those of the African jungle.

I am suggesting that the fundamentals of the mind persist, from generation to generation, roughly to the same extent as distinctive physical characters of the body. Mental tendencies are, I believe, much more permanent than is commonly supposed. A higher culture or a new religion may be given to a race but, if left to itself, its old culture and its old religion will emerge but slightly camouflaged. Take for instance Christianity in Southern Italy. Nominally the

Iberian stock in Southern Italy has been Christian for some 15 centuries. Christianity is a form of ethical theism: but the actual faith of the Southern Italian is magical polytheism, camouflaged as sacramentalism and the prayers of the saints. It was essentially the worship which prevailed among the Mediterranean Iberians before the Christian era. Invaders may sweep over the land: a new religion may be nominally established. But the old stock with the old faith effectively triumphs.

Such conclusions are disconcerting to enthusiasts; but this is mainly because enthusiasts are short-term optimists. Can we rightly expect any great fundamental change in a well-established stock in a couple of thousand years? When we consider that the human race has been evolving for something like a million years must we not expect that progress will be slow, especially if conditions do not make for the survival of the fittest?

And here I come to the heart of my subject. How can we secure the survival of the fittest and therefore the survival and development of the fittest types of religious aspiration and understanding.

I wish that the experts could reach agreement as to how variations arise in what is apparently a fairly homogeneous stock. All admit that there is a tendency to fluctuation observable in successive generations. Is this tendency inherent in the life-process? Is it affected by use and disuse, so that acquired characteristics are ultimately inherited? Do small variations and large mutations alike result from combinations of parental characteristics, latent or patent? Is the growth of the cell from which a new life takes its beginning merely dependent on the initial nature of the genes in the chromosomes? It seems to me that we must postulate some creative activity in the life-process, a constant 'more or less' flux. If we dislike any form of vitalism we may ascribe this to the activity of mind, of that unknown reality which in varying degrees is present in all living things. This carries us little further because we do not know what mind is, nor how it has seized upon certain chemical compounds of which carbon is the most important element. What I would insist upon is that a survey of the whole evolutionary process negatives the idea of a mere unpacking or re-assortment of what was already present in primal organisms. New things have been created, new degrees of reality have emerged, in earth's life-history. We cannot, of course, separate the process by which life has become progressively more complex from the environment in which change has occurred. The environment may cause or direct the change. Most certainly the environment destroys individuals not adapted for survival within it.

We have, however, to recognise that the changes which occur owing, as I imagine, to creative activity within the life-process are not always what we should consider valuable. If I may use the language of religion, God has not made man, and is not perfecting human civilisation, by causing offspring to be always slightly better or slightly more highly organised than were the parents. He allows a type of change which to our value-judgments can be either good or bad. Within certain limits degeneration is as likely as progress. And this is true whether the changes which we observe are large or small, inherit-

able or not. God's judgment on this random process of change is expressed by the subsequent action of the environment in which it occurs. By what is termed 'the ruthlessness of Nature' He weeds out the less valuable products of His plan.

The thought that God acts in this way is often disliked and ignored by those who wish to retain a belief in ethical Theism. They recoil from the idea that He permits degeneration as well as progress to take place. Their distress would be less acute if they remembered that environment is equally His creation. However perplexed we may be by the whole scheme, the fact remains that it has led to the successive emergence of more highly organised animal types culminating in man. And moreover in man there has been, owing to this process, a growth of moral excellence and spiritual understanding. By spiritual understanding I mean man's knowledge that the obligations of truth and goodness are imposed upon him from without by the very nature of things: that we ought to be loyal to absolute standards outside ourselves: that there are in the universe absolute values which transcend space and will outlast time. Man by acquiring such understanding has begun to enter the Kingdom of the good, the beautiful and the true. The tree is known by its fruits and the character of the Creator must be judged by the final outcome of His plan. The existence of evil has always seemed to challenge the goodness of God: our knowledge of the evolutionary process does not really increase perplexity.

By whatever process new characteristics arise in man and lower forms of life it is certain that some are inheritable. It is certain, moreover, that this is true alike of physical and mental characteristics. The structure of the mind is engendered with the body. Both are profoundly affected by the circumstances of life: yet some fundamentals are given at the start. And by the mind we mean the whole personality of a man. No dichotomy of human personality, such as St. Paul took from the philosophy of his time, is satisfactory. When we speak of the immortality of the soul, we mean the survival of human personality, or of such a development of that personality as gives it complete survival-value. I have said that the relation of mind to body is an unsolved enigma. We can only accept the fact that just as healthy well-formed parents normally have healthy well-formed children, so able parents usually have able children. Moreover there is no doubt that regard for religion and the ethical ideals with which it is associated is inherited. There are stocks in which spiritual aspiration shews itself, in various manifestations, generation after generation. Few religious leaders of fame and power lack ancestors, possibly in quite humble circumstances, who shewed religious enthusiasm. Equally of course parents of poor mental quality and vicious tendencies, unresponsive to the elevating influences with which they may gain contact, have like children. Such stocks are a burden and a source of weakness to the community.

But why do good stocks produce degenerate offspring? We all know cases when the parents, each apparently healthy and sound in mind, with a well-balanced nervous organisation, have a child which is semi-imbecile. Is feeble-mindedness a dysgenic mutation, the

'spontaneous' appearance of a new and bad variant? Is genius similarly a eugenic mutation? The probable answer is that each results from a chance combination of parental factors, a combination moreover which has some element of hereditary permanence. Statistical biology makes it certain that the man of genius, if he leaves descendants, usually hands on to some among them more than average ability. And feeble-mindedness, once established, will crop out generation after generation.

We can leave genius to take care of itself, though we have to admit that it is curiously and distressingly unfertile. This lack of fertility manifests itself in men of religious genius, in a Wesley no less than in a Newton. But the feeble-minded are disastrously prolific, and their fecundity must be a grave concern to every religious man and woman. The problem constantly confronts religious teachers. A Bishop is asked: what can be done as regards the confirmation of mentally-defective adolescents? They have no capacity of response to religious teaching: and in the poorer quarters of our great cities the clergy are constantly met by border-line cases, children and adults, in whom it is impossible to arouse any spiritual aspiration. I do not ask you to be concerned with their non-acceptance of some particular form of religious faith. The trouble is that these people are at such a low mental level that they have no instinct for spiritual values.

What is to be done with them? The harsh conditions of our civilisation until a century ago weeded them out. There was a ruthlessness against which our humane instincts revolt. To-day social changes, consequent on the more Christian organisation of the State, enable them to survive.

Very strong arguments can be brought forward for the sterilisation of mental defectives. Such were advanced in a recent letter to *The Times* (Jan. 18th, 1926) signed by a number of eminent medical men. The signatories urged that sentiment and ignorance should not be allowed to prevent legislation. Though they did not explicitly say so, they must be well aware that Christian religious sentiment instinctively sets itself against their proposals. The opposition may not be permanent; but its grounds are worth stating. Christianity seeks to create the Kingdom of God, the community of the elect. It tries to make what we may call a spiritually-eugenic society. It recognises that by no means all human beings are fit for this society. 'Many are called but few are chosen,' is a saying of its Founder, the truth of which continuous experience has verified. But, also, Christianity affirms the rights and value of the individual simply as a human being. And, together with this affirmation, the belief has been strong that all men are potentially sons of God, so made that, if they will, they can enter the Kingdom. 'No man is so vile, so degraded,' says the Protestant evangelist, 'that we can pronounce *a priori* that his conversion is hopeless.' 'Through the sacraments there is salvation for all,' says the Catholic. Yet an evangelical movement always ends by creating a spiritual aristocracy. And though group-suggestion through sacramental worship is powerful, suggestion is always a process of give and take. The low-grade worshipper gives base metal for gold. Thus

insensibly the moral level of the group-consciousness becomes lowered. And in the end unethical sacramentalism becomes a drag on spiritual progress.

The facts are well known: yet belief in the possibility of the salvation of all men, of bringing all into the Kingdom, persists. Such belief in the inherent value of the individual has great ethical importance. It is doubtful whether you will do unto others as you would that they should do unto you, if you think that they are not fundamentally of potentially equal value with yourself. The great bond of social unity is that we regard our fellow-citizens as sharing with ourselves the full heritage of humanity.

Now eugenists have made it clear that mental defectives not only lack some of the most valuable qualities of our human heritage, but also that they often transmit such lack to their off-spring. Yet a doubt remains as to whether there is no latent power of recovery. The question is asked: Among the children of parents both mentally defective is it not possible that normal human beings, or even genius, may be found? Until a negative answer can be given to this question Christian sentiment will be slow in giving approval to sterilisation proposals. The Christian community, though very conservative, is by no means devoid of common sense. If you could demonstrate that the feeble-minded were not only in themselves a social burden but also that there was nothing latent in them of value to the race you would rapidly win Christian sympathy and support. I doubt if you will ever be able to do this. But, if you shew, as it can be shewn, that the feeble-minded normally have so many defective descendants that their fecundity is a barrier to the extension of spiritual perception, you will gradually get Christians to approve action by which such fecundity is checked.

There seems to be no evidence which would warrant the belief that from bad stocks good can never be created. My friend Professor MacBride argues, from Tornier's work on the production of gold-fish, that mutations to be observed in domestic animals and plants result from germ-weakening under artificial conditions. He consequently rejects the idea that such mutations can play a decisive part in the process of evolution. But does not the same line of argument suggest that mental deficiency may be due to germ-weakening under artificial conditions? I understand that if gold-fish were allowed to breed freely under natural conditions they would revert to the small grey carp from which they were derived. Domestic animals, when they run wild, tend to revert to natural types. Our sense of values is determined by human fancy and human appetite: and we therefore term such reversion a degeneration to the original type. But from the point of view of Nature the reversion is surely a reversal of the artificial disorder which man has produced. Has man not produced conditions which make for similar disorder in his own race? The industrial revolution has within half a dozen generations removed the greater part of our people from the healthy influence of unspoiled nature. Slum life, drugs, artificial pleasures and excitements *may* surely produce germ-weakening. But is it not possible that the simple life, to use a convenient phrase, would

be sufficient to breed, even from the feeble-minded, a mentally healthy stock? I put the question diffidently in the search for information.

It is well known to all Social workers that the part of our population which lacks ability, initiative, self-reliance and energy tends to remain in the central areas of our great cities. The clergy who work in these areas find that any individuals who shew exceptional enterprise soon move away. There is thus an automatic segregation of the unfit. But these unfit shew every possible degree of what I venture to call germ-weakening. Mental deficiency is not a definite abnormality to be sharply distinguished from the normal. It is the extreme illustration of a graduated process. The average level of mental life of a slum area in which segregation has taken place is exceptional, much lower than that of the community as a whole. Religious work in such an area is practically hopeless. Even among the children the response is slight: among adults it is negligible. The few who 'have the religious sense' are those who sooner or later leave the area. Such facts, which are commonplaces to anyone engaged in religious administration, are worthy of the close attention of eugenicists.

I suggest to you that absence of any kind of religious interest is evidence of mental abnormality. Man is a religious animal, though he is by no means always naturally Christian either in temper or thought. The saying 'the nearer the soil, the nearer to God' is of course an exaggeration. But those who are uprooted from the soil are a difficult religious problem. Some, as I have said, have no apparent capacity for religious response. Others, in more prosperous ranks of society, often turn to 'cranky' types of belief in which the student of comparative religion can recognise a close affinity to low-grade expressions of the religious sense which have previously arisen in human evolution. Those of us who are concerned to preserve the highest type of religion, which is a harmony in which the elation of the mystic is fused with reason and ethical principle, are greatly troubled by the present religious chaos. It is almost a commonplace that the religious fancies that run riot to-day bear a singular likeness to those which were widespread in classical civilisation during the second century of our era. Have they been produced by similar social conditions? Are they the result of urban life? Is it true that the development of the constituents of the chromosomes in the germ-cells is injuriously affected by the way in which infants are reared in crowded areas, by life under artificial light, by alcohol, by conditions which militate against a natural and healthy sexual life? The problem is immensely important. Religious decay is not merely a sign of social ill-health: its consequence is likely to be increased social degeneration. That such decay exists is undoubted. I receive an amazing number of letters, of manuscripts and printed disquisitions, which testify to its prevalence. And some experience of controversy has made me realise how weak is the regard for truth of certain types of religious zealots. The power of suggestion, emotional upset due to the war, imperfect education—all may be contributory factors to the prevailing religious degeneration: and we do not forget that the foolish are always with us. It may be that the type of our population is changing: that the Nordic strain is less resistant than the Iberian to hostile influences in our present manner of life. But it is

hardly likely that such a change should have been so rapid. If the standpoint popularised by Professor Jennings in his *Prometheus* should pass the test of further research, we should be tempted to conclude that the artificial conditions of modern urban life are injurious to the development of the genes which the individual receives from his parents. We should then deduce that a return to the simple life would be the best way of furthering religious progress. Most certainly observation of the Quakers confirms this conclusion. They are our spiritual aristocrats and by the simplicity of their manner of life they stand apart from the great mass of the community. I would add that the simple life need be neither barren nor falsely ascetic: marriage and children should normally have a place within it.

A group of representative citizens, including some leading surgeons, has recently urged the value of the simple life as a protection against ill-health. In my belief that the physical and psychical characteristics of humanity are in much the same fashion products of heredity and environment, I welcome their plea. It seems to me that such knowledge as we have indicates that a more natural way of living would create mental no less than physical health and, in particular, that it would be of direct religious value.

Darwin's philosophy has been well summarized by Professor D'Arcy Thompson in the words: 'Fit and unfit arise alike but what is fit to survive does survive and what is unfit perishes.' Whatever be the detailed mechanism of evolution, the broad principle thus enunciated admits of no dispute. It has destroyed the old narrow teleology. It has made us see that we must assign as much importance to the environment which God has created as to the capacity for variation which He has given to living organisms. But, if we take this wider standpoint, there is nothing in this philosophy inconsistent with the Christian outlook. God's progressive action, His creative activity leading to spiritual understanding in man, remains. God, by allowing fit and unfit to arise alike and by using environment to destroy the unfit, has produced in humanity spiritual understanding. But He has also made man to a small yet increasing degree master of his own fate. We can do something, much more than we have yet done, to make human environment favourable to the survival of those qualities in humanity which we rightly value and of human beings in whom those qualities occur. But we must not create an environment in which the feeble-minded, the criminal, and the insane can multiply rapidly. Though such persons may have some descendants of social value, it is statistically demonstrable that the average of their descendants will be below the normal. When they breed freely they are an impediment to the creation of what the Christian terms the Kingdom of God on earth. The humane man, as a consequence of his religious instinct, desires a good environment for all who may be born into the world. He is learning that he cannot get his desire unless his social organisation is such that degenerates leave no offspring. When religious people realise that, in thus preventing the survival of the socially unfit, they are working in accordance with the plan by which God has brought humanity so far on its road their objections to repressive action will vanish.